



Part of Route 128 will be shut for two days in November



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Route 128 traffic is about to get worse: A section will be closed for two weekend days in November.

By Nicole Dungca | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

For the first time in recent memory, a section of Route 128 will close for two weekend days in November while crews demolish the Highland Avenue Bridge in Needham, detouring highway traffic onto local roads.

Consider yourself warned: The closure is scheduled to begin in the late evening of Nov. 4 and continue through Nov. 6, for those whose travel plans may take them that way.

“It’s not the Big Dig, but for around here, it’s pretty big,” said Daniel P. Matthews, a Needham selectman, of the looming inconvenience.

Transportation officials said they could not remember the last time the state had completely shut down a portion of Route 128/Interstate 95, outside of an emergency. The only highway closures that came to mind harkened back to the Big Dig and its nightmarish detours through Boston.

Even when the state closed lanes on Interstate 93 during a project to quickly fix bridges, it left half the lanes open during weekends.

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John McInerney, a district construction engineer for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, said the closure is necessary to keep drivers safe as workers take apart the bridge, which runs over the highway.

“There’s never a good time to do it,” he said. “You just try to pick the least painful.”

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The bridge, which passes over Route 128/Interstate 95 and connects Newton with Needham, was originally built in 1931 and reconstructed in 1953. The demolition represents a major step toward the completion of the Add-A-Lane project for Route 128/Interstate 95, a stretch of road so crowded the state has been allowing drivers to use the breakdown lane for more than three decades.

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directions along nearly 13 miles of the highway, from Randolph to the Wrentham Needham line. In the process, two dozen overpasses have been rebuilt, but none of those projects have required the closure of the highway underneath.

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Construction has entered its sixth and final phase along 3.8 miles through Needham to Wellesley. This last portion, completed largely by Barletta Engineering and Heavy Division of Canton, will cost the state about \$137.5 million. The project is scheduled to be finished by 2019.

For the Highland Avenue bridge, engineers decided to forgo the usual practice of rebuilding the bridge in place, instead choosing to construct a new steel-and-concrete bridge beside the old one, which has remained in use.

On Saturday night, the state will begin redirecting traffic over the new bridge, which has a higher clearance for cars. As heavy-duty excavators dismantle the old arch bridge in November, the state must close traffic on — and under — the new

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“We can’t have traffic running under the bridge when the machines are out there tearing it apart,” McInerney said.

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State officials have not announced the detours that will be put in place. But in an area all too familiar with snarled traffic, some are fearing the worst.

Arthur Wright, the owner of Mighty Subs, a nearby Needham eatery, said that the highway closure will be the latest in a long line of local detours.

“We’ve got tons of traffic around here, so nobody is more flabbergasted than they already are,” he said. “We’re just going to deal with it, and move on.”

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Engineers say that they will do their best to move quickly and minimize any major disruptions for drivers. They chose a weekend for the demolition to avoid weekday traffic, and decided to complete the work in two days, rather than the initially

scheduled four.

At first, the demolition was scheduled to take place between August and the early fall, McInerney said. But Verizon, which runs utilities over the bridge, faced a strike that postponed the project.

MassDOT officials did not provide numbers showing how much traffic passes through the area.

On occasion, accidents have forced area highways to close. In 1985, a tanker truck carrying 11,500 gallons of gasoline overturned on Route 128 in Peabody and burst into flames. About 2 miles of the highway were closed for two days after the fire melted a section of asphalt, backing up traffic as far as 8 miles.

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But this time around, people have advance notice. Matthews, the Needham selectman, says he thinks the inconvenience will be worth the extra lane. People have been talking about widening the highway since he was in high school, he said.

“In the long run, it’s going to be a good thing,” he said. “People are patient.”

Susan Richards, the director of the nearby Carter Memorial Nursery School, has a similar outlook.

“Well, they’ve got to do it sometime, right?” she said. “So, better on the weekend than during the week.”

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